The Portsmouth Papers

30p

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Published by Portsmouth City Council
Guildhall, Portsmouth

No. 21 March 1974

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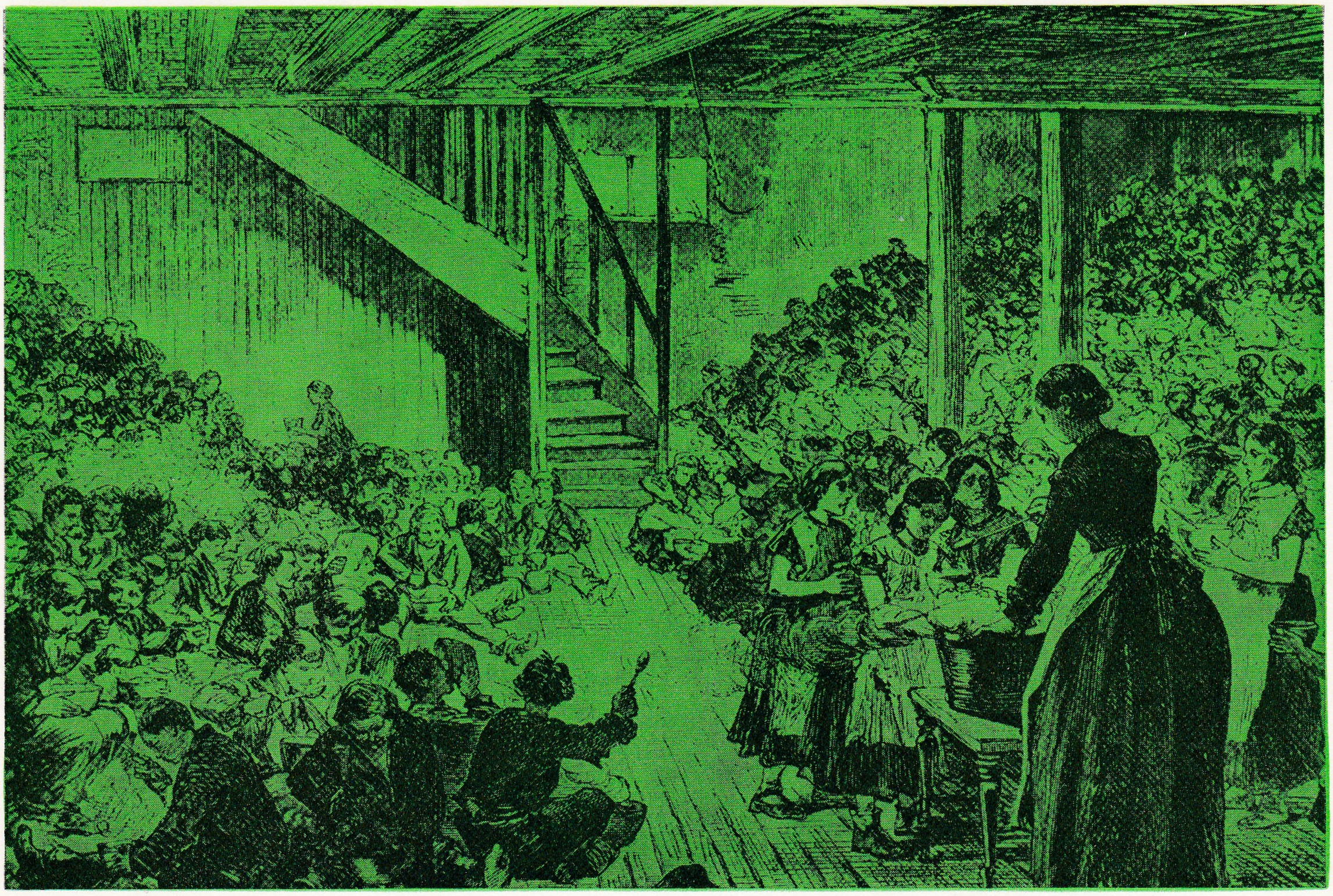

The PORTSMOUTH PAPERS *are published by*
Portsmouth City Council, Guildhall, Portsmouth

Issue No. 21 March 1974

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Cover illustration: Typical example of the gross overcrowding in a Portsmouth mid-Victorian primary school.

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THE CONDITION OF THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR IN MID-VICTORIAN PORTSMOUTH

Mrs. Jean Stanford and Professor A. Temple Patterson

In an earlier paper of this series[1] extracts were quoted from the autobiography of Sir Walter Besant, in which he described his happy and healthy boyhood in Portsmouth during the 'forties of the last century. He told how he and his companions played on the ancient walls which still encircled the old town, clambering about the bastions, peeping into the mouths of the cannon, sitting on the gun-carriages, creeping out through the embrasures, peering over into the moat below or playing at defending the place against an enemy outside; or else running or rolling down the grassy slopes of the glacis to the meadows that still stretched beyond it, survivals of the days when the garrison insisted on a clear field of fire from the ramparts. In trespassing on the glacis and the meadows, incidentally, they were risking being chased and if caught chastised by the 'Johnnies' or watchmen whose duty it was to keep boys off them. At times young Walter wandered through the more respectable parts of Portsea, past the little houses where retired sailormen and ex-ratings of the Navy lived, pausing often to stare fascinated at the strange exotic objects that filled many of their windows, mementos of cruises in different seas or relics of the recent China War. In the summer came the annual family excursion on foot to Portchester, with its romantic ruins to be explored and its tea-houses where teas which in retrospect were unequalled could be consumed, followed by the long walk home, partly through fields, in the evening sunlight.

Another Portsmouth boy, James Price, has recorded that about ten years earlier he and his playmates were

> 'a jolly lot – trundled hoops, played at marbles, whip and peg-tops, rounders, prisoner's base, pitch-hat, and on winter nights at "nickey-night", with flint and steel to strike when told to "show your light". We also concocted fireworks out of the discarded powder we picked up when the soldiers drew their cartridges at the Guard House on the Grand Parade.'

But when Besant wrote his autobiography towards the close of the century fifty years or more had passed since the days he was describing and though no doubt his recollections had a basis of fact it is probable that the picturesque Portsmouth he saw far away down the long vista of Memory Lane had a rather rose-coloured hue. Moreover he had been the child of a comfortable middle-class family (nor was Price, the son of a printer and bookseller, brought up in poverty) and there were districts into which it is likely that he never ventured, deterred both by parental warnings and a natural repugnance from squalour, and about which he knew little or nothing. Here many streets were covered by green foetid mud or stagnant black pools and stinking heaps of refuse. It was said that

> 'in Gold Street your sovereigns would tarnish; in Silver Street your shillings would turn blue; and in Copper Street your halfpence would turn to verdegris'.

Most houses were badly built, many of them back to back, and the ground floors of all were very damp. The older ones were always in a state of filth and bad repair, with their cellars – in which people often lived – soaking either with water filtering in from land-soaks or springs or, worse still, from the overflow of nearby privies, which there were no drains to carry off. The newer houses were hardly any better, for their builders had rushed them up with shoddy and inadequate materials and no regard for provision for water or roads. Some had outer walls only half a brick thick and others were actually built over filthy privies. New streets soon became almost impassable because of mud, which could reach a depth of two or three feet, so that people had sometimes to be helped through it or even rescued from it.

Everywhere there were courts very different from the fictional one in which Besant had placed two of his characters in his novel *By Celia's Arbour* and which he had described as 'large, clean and a very cathedral close for quietness'. Many of these courts were closed at both ends and approached by covered passages, and in them the filth flooding from privies and the refuse thrown by the inhabitants accumulated. In some there were only one tap and one privy to serve as many as sixty people. Such was Messum's Court, situated below sea-level and therefore very damp, reached from a narrow street below the town walls known as Prospect Row (which has now blossomed into Gunwharf Road) and through a tunnel only two feet wide which was called Squeeze-Gut Alley. Here 116 people lived, some of them in cellars, with one privy between them and one standpipe which supplied water for perhaps ten minutes a day. Through the court ran a large open drain as well as an open midden, and when this was emptied the contents would remain for three days on the surface opposite the exit, suffocating the whole area with its stench.

The scantiness of the water-supply meant that for most purposes the people who lived in such places

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[1] Portsmouth Nineteenth-Century Literary Figures', by A. Temple Patterson (Portsmouth Paper No. 14).

used rainwater collected in butts outside their houses or bought it (if they could afford to do so) at a halfpenny or three farthings a bucketful from travelling water-carts, or sometimes sank wells in the muddy paths outside their doors. One result of this was that the well-water was often polluted by a neighbouring cesspool, as well as by the feet of passers-by. Moreover the wells were a danger to walkers, especially at night, and it was not uncommon for small children to have to be rescued from them. The utter shortage of privies meant that chamber utensils were emptied in courts and passages or into the Camber where their contents accumulated. Cesspools and open ditches and drains abounded, and even Milton, though it was still a rural area, did not escape them. In the town there was a stagnant ditch twenty feet wide in Hyde Park Road; and at South View an open ditch five feet wide and a hundred feet long, only twelve feet from the fronts of houses, held the accumulated filth of nineteen years.

Pig-keeping in these courts and poorer streets created another great nuisance. In East Street twenty or thirty pigs were kept in a confined space close behind dwelling-houses, their dung being deposited in an open yard for three months at a time. There was no water-supply and the stench was sometimes so bad that people were forced to leave their homes. When Robert Rawlinson, an inspector of the Board of Public Health, visited Portsmouth in 1848 and began to take evidence Dr. Engledue, who was the founder of the Royal Portsmouth Hospital and a leading sanitary reformer in the town, told him he had visited a girl patient whose workroom lay only seven feet from an open cesspool which received blood and washings from a pig-killing establishment where the 'smell was so pestiferous that he (not being stink-seasoned) could not remain five minutes without fainting'.

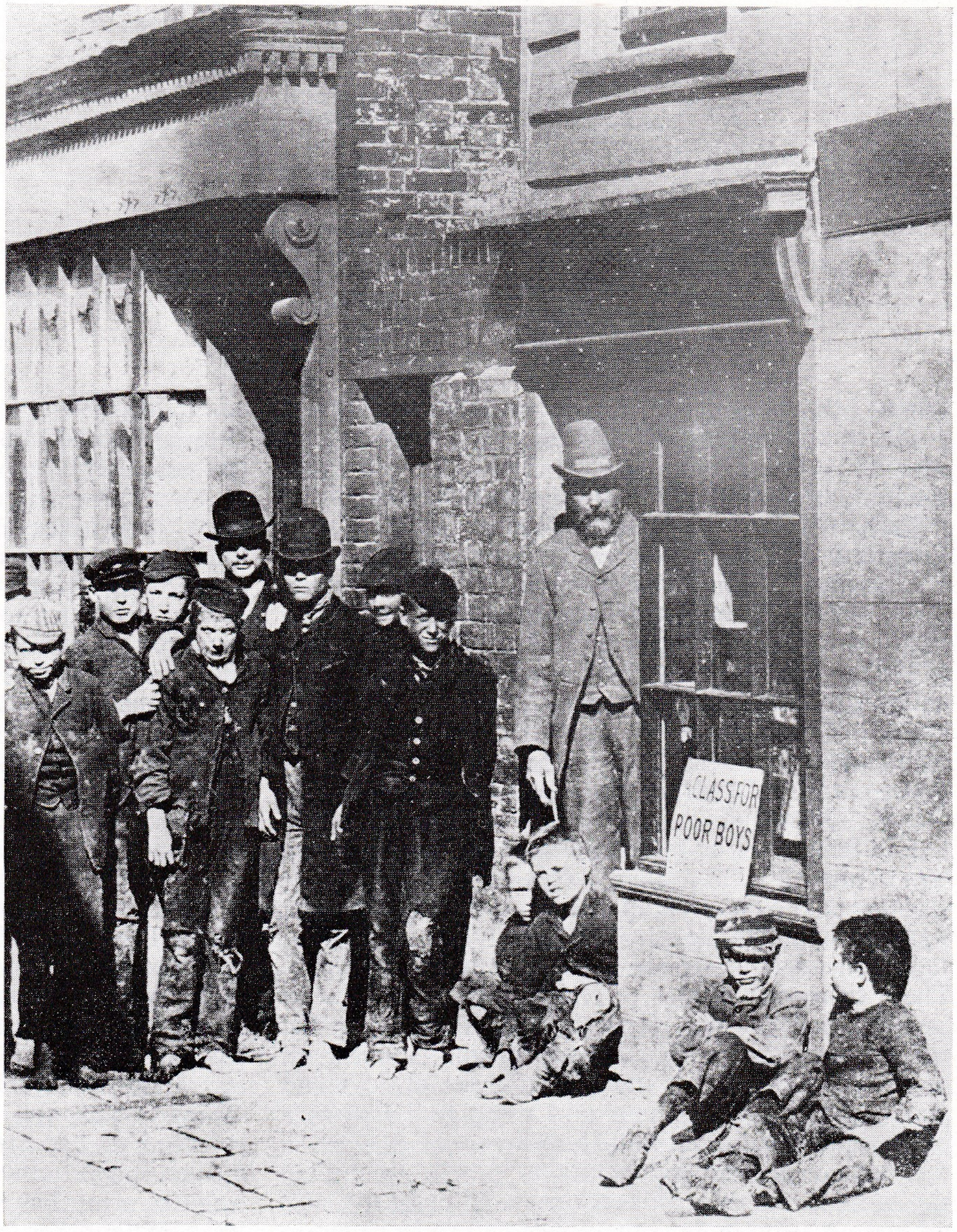
Most of this applies to the poorer districts of the old town and of Portsea, but parts of Landport which had been hastily rushed up to meet the overspill from the latter and to house the increased labour force of the dockyard during the Napoleonic War were as bad or even worse. To any sensitive nostrils the stench of the narrow crowded lanes on either side of Lake Road was almost intolerable. Here again for want of proper refuse collection the inhabitants threw their ashes, garbage and filthy water into the streets or dug large ditches for them at the backs of the houses; and for want of proper drainage slimy puddles lay in every lane, overflowing on to the bare floors of the houses with every rainfall. In the hovels of Matrimony Row and the dens of Jacob's Ladder, with their walls half a brick thick and their eight feet by six feet kitchens slopping with liquid filth, the wretched inhabitants often shared a bed of rags and straw between three or four.

Such conditions could be matched in the corresponding districts of many other British towns at this time. But in Portsmouth there were special circumstances which made things worse than in many or most of them. The military regulations that still closed the town gates at night from twelve till four kept within the walls twice or thrice a week the stinking night-waggons which had been cleansing at least some of the pits and cesspools. On warm nights the effluvia from these, as well as from the moats and the Camber, were particularly offensive. Point was specially affected because of its proximity to the latter, which, taken in conjunction with its own lack of house drainage, may account for its having been given the ironical nickname of 'Spice Island'.

Although things gradually became somewhat better in the two decades that followed Rawlinson's enquiry in 1848, and especially after the belated formation in 1863 of a Portsmouth Local Government Board with powers of sanitary control, it is not surprising that at the time of his investigation the annual death-rate of children under the age of five in Portsmouth was over 8%, while 20% did not live beyond their first year, and the overall death-rate of 25·37 per thousand was well above the national average.

Disgusting environment was not all that the children of the poorer working class had to endure. The high mortality rate also owed much to lack of proper food and clothing. The primitive cooking facilities in their homes meant that food had to be restricted to what could be boiled or fried, such as soup, potatoes (which together with bread were the only staples) and occasionally a little fried fat bacon. To these weak tea should be added. Moreover much of such food as they could get was of inferior quality, especially the bread. Adulteration of food had begun in the eighteenth century and by the middle of the nineteenth it had reached an almost incredible pitch. In the case of bread decayed German yeast, alum, sand and various minerals were used. These became mixed with the impurities resulting from the insanitary conditions under which the bread was baked – human sweat, discharge from abscesses, dead cockroaches and so forth. In addition the poor were often cheated by the use of deficient weights and scales in the small shops.

During the vital years of development and growth poor children were therefore starved of essential



A class for poor boys, run by an imitator of John Pounds, shown outside Pounds's shop.

nutriment and consequently often developed tuberculosis and rickets. Moreover it was impossible for them to have adequate protection against colds because of their insufficient and unsuitable clothing. Bad and scanty as their food was forced to be, the money of the poor had to be devoted first to it. Only after a minimum of food had been obtained for the family was anything that was left over spent even on clothing and fuel. This meant that the deficiencies of these from which they consequently suffered had taken their toll in weakening the health of the household before deficiencies of diet went to work on it. It is true that these deprivations stirred local philanthropists into taking action. Through certain schools they provided food and clothing for poor pupils, and they also founded soup kitchens, clothing societies and shoe clubs to meet the needs of the poor at nominal prices. But these efforts were insufficient to cope adequately with the problem and the combination of appalling living conditions, lack of adequate clothing and deleterious diet left many children a prey to every kind of disease – whooping-cough, smallpox, measles, scarlet fever and (among small children) convulsions. Hardly a week passed in Portsmouth without a little child perishing from this latter cause. Many died because of the common practice of giving them opiates to keep them quiet, the favourite being the notorious 'Godfrey's Cordial', which contained laudanum. The Portsmouth coroner often deplored and condemned this practice, as when he found that this sinister nostrum had hastened the death of an eleven-weeks-old baby, or when six-months-old Henrietta More died of narcotism caused by her mother's medication of syrup from a poppy head. Smallpox and typhus were endemic in the poorer parts of the town, and cholera was present as early as 1846. In 1848 and 1849 there were epidemics of it in which a thousand people died, mostly in the latter year. Though no actual figures are known, it was asserted that children constituted the majority of the

victims, especially girls, who were attacked in greater numbers and more severely than any other class of person.

Children, of course, did not die from disease alone. Almost every week there were reports in the *Hampshire Telegraph* of them falling into fires, pulling pans of boiling water over themselves or setting their clothing alight. They fell into the uncovered wells in the footpaths, drowned themselves clambering over the logs in the water at the Hard, or were maimed or killed under the wheels of vehicles or the flying hoofs of horses. Many accidents occurred in the home when young children were left alone, as in the cases of seven-year-old Sarah Passingham and four-year-old Charles Buckland whose clothes caught fire, and Emma Sedgeley who fell into a large pan of water and was drowned. As for street accidents, their frequency was due to the fact that apart from the ramparts there was hardly anywhere else for the children of the poor to play, and the streets were crowded with them. These swarming hordes of children presented a very real problem to the respectable inhabitants of the town. One solicitor found it impossible to carry on his business because of the large number of boys and girls playing rowdy games and using foul language in the square outside his office. A favourite pastime of the boys was throwing stones at people (including the sentries on the fortifications) and property, and on one occasion in 1857 the police had to be called in to break up a battle between two mobs of boys totalling between two and three hundred who were pelting each other with them. It is small wonder that a curate of St. Mary's declared that 'the boys of Portsmouth were enough to drive one out of the place'. If more schools – many more would have been needed – had been provided than actually existed in the middle of the nineteenth century both this nuisance caused by idle and unruly children and the dangers to life and limb to which they were sometimes exposed might have been reduced or avoided. As it was, however, large-scale provision of schools was slow in coming.

To the neglect by society was added neglect by parents. The coroner noted with alarm in 1847 the sinister fact that the deaths of illegitimate children were becoming much more frequent. Nor was it uncommon for parents to turn their quite young children out of their homes to fend for themselves, so that they had to sleep where they could, in woodyards, pigsties and the like. In one week in 1872 no fewer than thirteen children, twelve boys and a little girl, were found wandering the streets in a destitute state. In another case two boys aged thirteen and twelve respectively, who had been caught stealing cabbages, reported that they were usually turned out of their home at night to sleep under an archway. They had never attended school or any place of worship and neither could read or write; their father 'pitched into them when drunk' and 'sometimes they had victuals and sometimes not'. The indifference of much of society – not all, as will appear – to the sufferings of the poor even when they involved children is apparent in the case of Mary Beveridge. For seven years this poor woman had been blind and had suffered from constant severe headaches. Her husband was a drunken brute who beat her and brought other women into the house, and with many mouths to feed and nothing but a crust of dry bread for herself on most days she could not manage to wean her thirteen-months-old son Thomas. Eventually she reached the end of her tether, strangled him, and was committed to Winchester as insane. Later she was discharged to Portsea Island Union workhouse and then at the request of her husband released to his care, less than two years after her crime. The poor law guardians were probably glad to have made a saving in the rates. Nine months after she had been returned to her worthless husband and her struggle against poverty, with complete indifference to her welfare and that of her remaining children, she strangled another small son.

Nor was she the only mother to do away with her own child. It was not uncommon for bundles to be fished out of the moat or ditches, or even found at the bottom of respectable gardens, and then discovered to contain infant bodies. Sometimes the child had died naturally and the body had probably been abandoned to save funeral expenses, but when the cause of death was asphyxia or drowning things assumed a more sinister complexion, though even then it was not always possible to determine whether it was accidental or not and only rarely could it be definitely certified as murder. One poor infant of twelve months was luckier than most in being rescued from certain death one winter evening by a young soldier walking with his girl who found her bruised and covered over with seaweed at the water's edge near Southsea Castle. Such discoveries of babies dead or alive but generally dead were numerous enough, but they were probably outnumbered by those that went undiscovered, for doubtless the ditches, dungheaps and the filthy waters of the moat concealed many more pitiful little corpses.

To the neglect of the physical well-being of the

children of the poor was added neglect of their moral and spiritual welfare, so that many of them were introduced early to a life of vice and crime. Large numbers of the working classes attended no place of worship, professed no religion whatever, and their children went unbaptised. Of 2300 registered births in St. Mary's parish only 800 had been followed by baptism; a quarter of the children of St. John's parish and more than half of those in Trinity parish were unbaptised. Sundays were spent by their parents in either supine sloth or sensuality.

Since liquor was one of the few sources of pleasure available to the poor and the warm sociability of the public-house gave the working man an escape from the damp, dirty and comfortless hovel that was his home, drinking was one of his principal pastimes. In consequence children often became victims of their elders' intemperate habits. They were introduced early to drink, often by their own parents. It was not unknown for young apprentices under sixteen years of age to appear before Portsmouth magistrates for being drunk and disorderly; and on one occasion two young girls brought before the court for assaulting a woman in a public-house at Portsea proved to be inveterate brandy-drinkers.

In turn, the poverty caused to a family by the drinking habits of the breadwinner seems to have been the cause of many young children turning to crime. Theft was their chief offence. In the period between 1847, when the Juvenile Offenders Act transferred juvenile cases to magistrates' courts, and 1860, 488 children appear to have been dealt with in summary courts, of whom 355 were charged with theft. Very few offenders, however, came before the magistrates more than once. Either they left the town, or managed to avoid being caught a second time, or else did not commit a second offence. That the first alternative was often the reason and that many of these young criminals were itinerant seems likely from the fact that although they were appearing before Portsmouth magistrates for the first time they were recorded as having previous convictions. Some young Portsmouth children, however, were incorrigible offenders and frequent spells in jail, where old and young, first offenders and hardened criminals, were allowed to mingle and converse, did nothing to reform them but probably had an opposite effect. Such a one was William Tow, who regularly came before the courts in 1860, though he was only nine years of age. Eventually the justices sentenced him to five years at a reformatory school. This had become possible after the Reformatory Schools Act of 1854, which had empowered magistrates to commit anyone under the age of sixteen to such a school, and in the next three years fourteen Portsmouth children were sent to the Hampshire reformatory at Eling. Had this procedure been possible earlier it would probably have benefited many a young offender such as William Sivier, who had twenty previous convictions for vagrancy when he appeared before the courts in 1848 at the age of twelve. This appearance was followed by two more in the same year, one in 1849 and two in 1850, after which he disappeared from the records. Besides vagrancy his offences included theft and obtaining money by false pretences, as when he cashed in on the cholera epidemic by pretending to be an orphan whose parents had both perished of the disease. The police claimed that he came from a respectable though poor home, but the prison chaplain noticed that each time he visited it there was less furniture in the house, and the mother complained that her husband's drinking habits had brought the family to poverty.

Children in those days were often subjected by the courts to the same severe punishments as adults. Not only were they sometimes sentenced to several weeks' hard labour if found loitering in the streets, especially if they had been before the magistrates before, but restrictions and penalties were imposed on them for trifling offences that adults would be unlikely to commit. For flying kites or playing marbles when or where they ought not, for example, or stealing a toy or a penny tart, or helping themselves to fruit from a garden in a moment of temptation they were punished as severely as adults were for more serious crimes. Moreover all boys who received sentences in Portsmouth during the 1840s and early 1850s also got a private whipping as part of their punishment, though by 1860 magistrates tended not to impose this extra penalty. Indeed by then they sometimes showed comparative leniency to young offenders brought before them for trivial first offences. In the case of three boys who stole herrings from a fishmonger's open window the (for those days) relatively light penalty of three days' hard labour was imposed because the justices felt that the fishmonger was at fault in placing temptation in the way of the poor and needy. When a little girl was brought before the court for stealing tools from her stepfather the bench did its utmost to persuade him to forego prosecution and when it failed sentenced her only to a nominal one day's imprisonment. Where children who came before the magistrates were of a very tender age their cases were often dismissed. On the other hand many children not quite so young who were brought up for offences

that would not be considered criminal today received harsh punishment. An apprentice could find himself serving a month's hard labour for being persistently late for work, while two boys were actually sentenced to fourteen days' imprisonment for playing hopscotch, presumably at the wrong time or place, and another got seven days for hurling a stone from a sling, although he had hit nobody.

Many abandoned or orphaned children roamed the streets, getting their food by begging or stealing and sleeping where they could in the courts and alleys. The Portsmouth justices were very strict about vagrancy and begging, and sentenced young children caught in such acts to fourteen days or more of hard labour. Even so, being sent to prison meant for these young vagrants that they did get food and shelter of a sort, so that when released they would often commit the same offences again in order to regain the shelter of the prison walls.

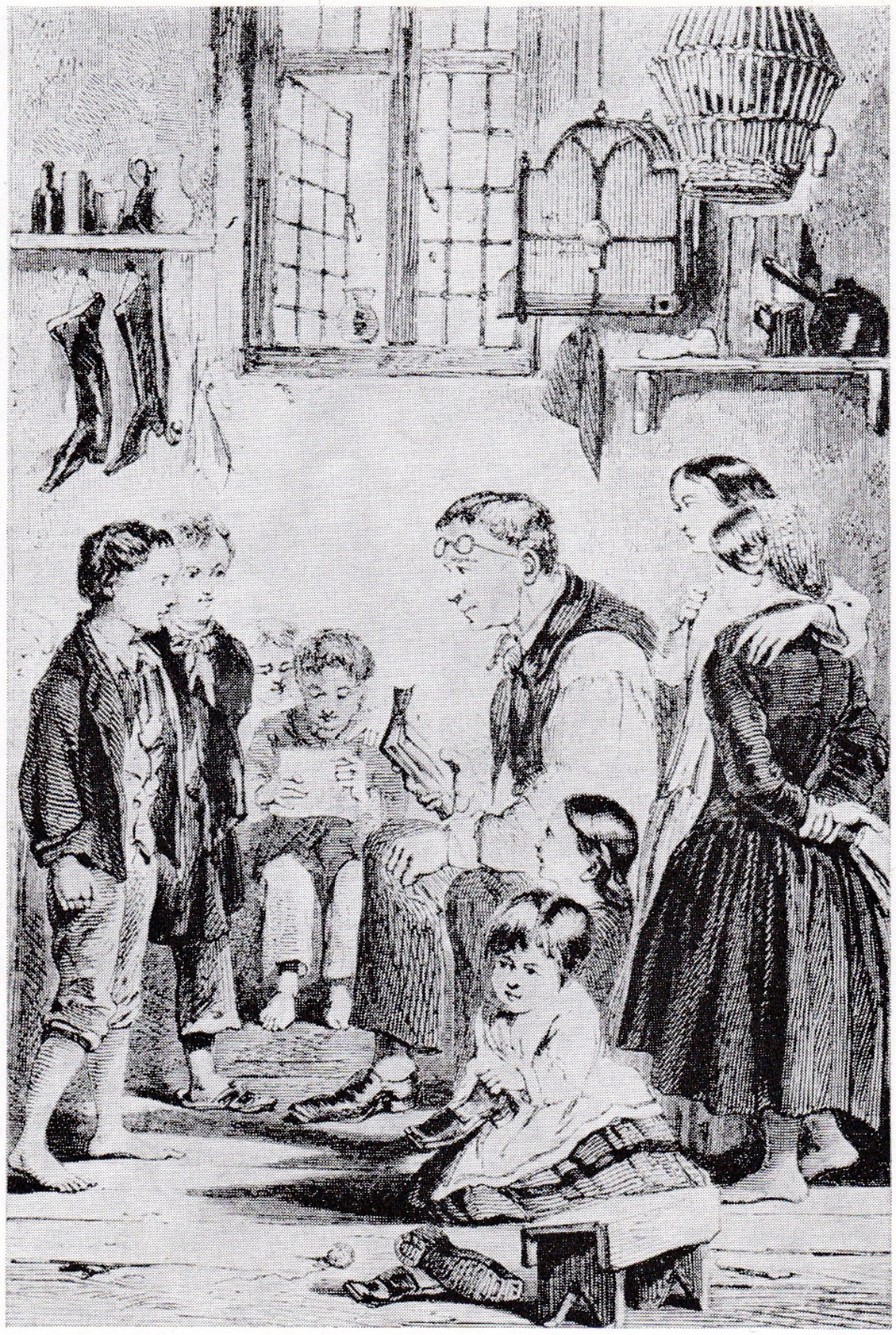
That vice and crime increased as they did in the poorer areas of Portsmouth, especially around Point and in Portsea, was partly or largely due to the inadequacy of the street lighting and the small numbers of the police. All the outward parts of the borough were in darkness at night, and even where there was lighting it was totally insufficient. The lamps were far apart and their glass often so dirty as to obscure any light whatever. Around the ramparts the absence of lighting nightly attracted soldiers, sailors and prostitutes, so that children playing in this area got an early introduction to vice.

Prostitution was common in Portsmouth. Poverty created situations in which immorality flourished. Overcrowded homes meant that whole families and even other persons slept together in the same room or even in the same bed, which led to precocious immorality in children. There is no evidence that traffic in young children for immoral purposes was carried on in the town, as it was in London, but the evidence does seem to suggest that girls were introduced early to 'the oldest profession'. A police superintendent stated in 1864 that out of a total of 1791 known prostitutes 41 were under sixteen years of age, and the minister of Kent Street Baptist church asserted that he knew of large numbers of girls of thirteen, fourteen and fifteen who were on the streets. Many girls were led to prostitution through domestic service. 'Skivvies' and nurserymaids were fair game for many of their employers and their seduction was often the first step towards a life of vice. But whereas in other towns the former domestic servants who became prostitutes had often originally been workhouse girls this does not seem to have been the case in Portsmouth. Here it was claimed that the girls brought up in the segregated workhouse were less inclined to fall by the wayside than their counterparts elsewhere. The house schoolmaster declared that to his knowledge during his sixteen years of service only two girls had taken to an abandoned life after leaving.

The more humane and philanthropic of the people of Portsmouth, moreover, were by no means all indifferent to the problem of prostitution; nor indeed to the whole wider problem of poverty. A Female Penitentiary was established to reclaim young prostitutes, which in 1857 had twenty-seven inmates, though it lacked funds to help others who, it was asserted, wanted to give up their calling.

Many people realised that to provide education was a way of curbing juvenile crime and vice, but before the Education Act of 1870 no comprehensive provision was available to keep children off the streets, and idle and unruly boys and girls were left to roam at will and fall a prey to temptation. The state did undertake to educate pauper and sometimes criminal children and the offspring of servicemen, besides having responsibility for some factory schools; and by 1850 the total provision under these heads amounted to about 600 schools in the whole country. Otherwise only voluntary effort existed to educate the children of the poorer classes in the middle years of the century.

Earlier, however, Portsmouth had been the scene of a remarkable though small-scale effort, the pioneering 'ragged school' of the lame cobbler John Pounds. Born in St. Mary's (now Highbury) Street in 1766, the son of a dockyard carpenter, he was apprenticed to a shipwright at the age of twelve, but three years later he fell down a dry dock and broke a leg, which left him a cripple for life, incapable of any but sedentary work. In consequence he was then apprenticed to a shoemaker and after a while set up as a cobbler in St. Mary's Street. For fifteen years he toiled alone in his little wooden workshop with a living-room above, after which he adopted a brother's son who had been born crippled. The child was only one year old at adoption, but Pounds reared him successfully and actually cured his deformity with surgical boots of his own making, copied from the proper appliances, which he was too poor to buy. He also taught him reading, writing and botany, and gave him religious instruction, and in the course of this discovered that he had a gift for teaching of which he determined to make fuller use. With hot potatoes, roasted apples and similar bait he attracted to his workshop thirty or forty idle boys and girls and taught them all he knew, meanwhile adding



John Pounds teaching poor children in his cobbler's shop.

to his own small stock of learning in order to have more to pass on to them. He also taught many of the boys to cook their own plain food and mend their own shoes, sent them to Sunday schools, and in order to enable them to make a creditable appearance there begged clothing from some friends which they were allowed to put on at his house on Sunday mornings and return to him in the evenings after he had taken them to chapel. So far as he could he acted as doctor and nurse for his pupils' ailments, and made bats, balls, crossbows and shuttlecocks for their games. But though he was so fond of teaching he would not reach all the children who came to him; his preference was for the poor and unruly and he would often say 'I wants they as nobody cares for. They's they for me'.

Once a week in the summer months he took his 'little wagabonds' for a whole day's excursion out of the foetid streets where they lived into the country-side, with a grand picnic on the top of Portsdown Hill, from which they could sometimes see the spire of Chichester cathedral in the distance. He revelled in their happiness, but at the same time his kindness and patience did not exclude discipline. 'I has a stick', he said, 'and they know it, the wagabonds. Sometimes I lays it on right well. They doesn't like it at the time, but they loves me for it all the better after. They knows it's all for their good'. On these country outings, therefore, they were not allowed to run wild. 'We're to have no running over the young corn', he would tell them, 'and no trampling down the meadow grass. We're here to enjoy ourselves, not to do mischief'.

Pounds was already fifty-two when in the early years of the nineteenth century he gathered these children about him. Being badly in need of books for them he sought the aid of Dr. Russell Scott,[1] the minister of the Unitarian chapel in the High Street, a powerful preacher who was known as 'the Oracle of the South', and who responded by going straight upstairs and bringing down an armful, with a promise of more when these were worn out. Scott was succeeded in 1833 by the Rev. Henry Hawkes, who also became a firm friend and helper of Pounds. When Hawkes started a Sunday school in 1835 Pounds was delighted to send his best pupils there, but he assured the minister, 'I never bring any of my little wagabonds to your school till I'se made something of them myself. No, I'se not send any of my unruly ones to plague your lady teachers'. After his death in 1839 his work came to the knowledge of Dr. Thomas Guthrie of Edinburgh, afterwards known as 'the Apostle of the Ragged Schools', who was greatly influenced by it. In 1844 the Ragged School Union was founded under the presidency of the great philanthropist Anthony Ashley Cooper, afterwards Earl of Shaftesbury, and John Pounds is now generally regarded as one of the chief inspirers of the movement, though not (as sometimes stated) its founder. Five years later Portsmouth's first Free Ragged School was established in premises in St. George's Square, moving in 1856 to newly completed and purpose-designed buildings in Richmond Place, Portsea, at a time when there were little more than a dozen in the country.

According to the census of 1851, which showed the population of the town as 72,096, 9514 children were attending day schools of one sort or another (including the Grammar School and various private academies that do not come into consideration in this paper), which meant that thousands were receiving no education at all, except perhaps in Sunday schools in some cases. To take first the minority of poor children for whom the state or public authority provided or helped to provide some modicum of instruction, the workhouse school contained 102 boys and 120 girls. Conditions in this school compared very favourably with those found generally in the schools of the town; but of this more will be said below in a survey of the life of the workhouse children. The sending of young criminals away to a reformatory school had not yet

[1] He was the grandfather of the late C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian*.

begun. 1067 children were being educated in primary schools belonging to the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church and 1160 in others belonging to the British and Foreign Schools Society. These two bodies, which had both been founded about forty years earlier, were maintained by the Church of England and the leading nonconformist churches respectively, and both received government grants, although very much the lion's share – 80% of all government grants to education – went to the National Society. Both employed what was called the monitorial system, which had been evolved independently by Bell, a Churchman, and Lancaster, a Quaker, about the time when the societies were founded. By this the master of the school gave a lesson to the senior class, each of whose members then imparted the instruction he had just received to another class as best he or she could. The great merit originally claimed for this was that it was a cheap means of educating large numbers of children in the absence of sufficient trained teachers. On the other hand its defects are obvious, but since more teachers were now available it was beginning to pass away. Besides the grant-aided schools of the two societies there were in Portsmouth three other purely voluntary ones connected with the Church of England and a dozen maintained by various individual nonconformist sects. These Church and nonconformist schools usually charged their pupils a fee, often as small as a penny a week, and although the children who attended them were poor they were generally the offspring of industrious and respectable working people.

Portsmouth also had one school which arose out of its position as a naval town. This was the Royal Seamen's and Marines' Orphan School, which in contrast to the majority of those in the town seems to have been well endowed with funds. Established in 1834, it – or rather, they, for it was a dual institution – educated, clothed and fed sixty boys and thirty girls; and in 1853 an industrial home was also built in which a selection of the girls were boarded and trained for domestic service. The patrons of the institution included Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, besides other members of the royal family and a great many titled persons; in addition to whose subscriptions the officers and men of various ships contributed handsomely to its support with money and gifts of clothing. There were also the four Royal Victoria Schools, whose pupils, educated free, were specifically the children of seamen, marines and fishermen, and which over a period of twenty years had supplied the Navy with more than 230 men, as well as the shopkeepers in Portsmouth and Portsea with errand-boys. For them, however, funds were a constant problem, since until they received a government grant in 1845 they were purely dependent on voluntary contributions, collections from boxes placed on ships and at the dockyard gates (which were unreliable) and the proceeds of an occasional charity sermon. Even after the grant had been obtained it failed to improve the school's financial position appreciably.

Elementary education was also provided in Portsmouth by dame schools (ostensibly, at least), charity schools and Sunday schools. Dame schools had their origin in the eighteenth century and generally catered for younger children. They were usually not so much teaching institutions as places where parents could deposit their children while they went to work or simply to get them out of the way, and in which the often aged teacher would continue her normal activities, tending a shop, sewing or washing, while the children remained in her care. Some were little more than daytime lodging-houses, and there were a particularly large number of such in St. John's and Trinity Wards in Portsea.

Charity schools were closely connected with a church or chapel and were supported by legacies and endowments together with collections from charity sermons. They normally provided free education for their scholars. Portsmouth, however, seems to have had few of them, the most successful being one that had been established by the Beneficial Society. This had been set up a hundred years earlier when such institutions were being inaugurated all over the country by small tradesmen, artisans and labourers who wished to insure themselves against sickness, unemployment and funeral expenses. The Portsea Beneficial Society in addition aimed to undertake the education of orphans and children whose parents were in poor circumstances. By 1845 450 boys and girls were being educated under the monitorial system in its school, but as with most other schools in the town finance was a problem. There were also about thirty Sunday schools in the Portsmouth area, many of them run in connection with day schools. Since they did not keep children from employment, they proved popular and usually had a higher attendance than the day schools.

Between the pauper children on the one hand for whom the poor relief system provided education and on the other the offspring of the respectable working classes who attended the voluntary schools listed above, there existed a large number of other children

Two groups of Portsmouth mid-Victorian school-children.
(Courtesy of Mrs. B. M. Hickmott and the Schools Service, Portsmouth City Museums.)

who swarmed in the mean streets, alleys and courts that have been described. The census of 1851 revealed that 40% of the boys among them and 38% of the girls were neither employed nor receiving education. This was not only because their parents were unable or unwilling to pay the small fees that most schools charged, but because they were often so ragged, dirty and verminous that no 'penny a week' child would associate with them. When one mother brought her sons to the master of the Beneficial School he refused to admit them because their clothes were 'scarcely secured to their persons', and two girls were dismissed from the Seamen's and Marines' Orphan School on account of 'the intolerably filthy state in which their mothers, despite repeated warnings, sent them to school'. Often these children included the offspring of convicts, either transported or in prisons at home; of thieves not in custody and the lowest kinds of beggars and tramps; children of worthless drunken parents or parents whose neglect and cruelty drove them to shift for themselves; children who should have been in the workhouse but who were leading vagrant and semi-criminal lives, maintaining themselves by begging and stealing; or children of street traders, labourers' assistants and other honest workers who were too poor to pay for their schooling.

For these the opportunity of receiving education came with the formation of the Ragged Schools. The first to be established in Portsmouth, in 1849,[1] differed from the usual ragged school in that it was a member of the National Society, and was no doubt formed because the leading spirits of the National schools in the town wanted to reach the class of children who were too poor to pay the fees demanded at the usual National school – the ragged 'street arabs', as these were called. The school had close connections with the Navy. The Admiralty paid it a grant to take in the children of seamen, and the Royal Naval College which was then situated in the town regularly sent it rice, bread and broken victuals. Later, when funds were low in 1864 an appeal to the Admiralty brought a donation of £25. In order to raise further funds Admiral Sir Henry Chads, the head of the naval gunnery school at Portsmouth, inaugurated popular readings given by various people from the works of such authors as Dickens and Macaulay – a method of raising money and providing entertainment at the same time which was popular in the '60s – the proceeds of which were handed over to the school. It had begun by educating forty destitute children, but seven years later the total had risen to 168 boys and 104 girls, and it was not only teaching but attempting to feed and clothe its pupils, members of its committee donating secondhand garments for the latter purpose. Later, material was cut up and given out to the girls by the mistress, after which it was sewn up by them and the finished articles sold to the children at half their cost. A clothing club was organised to which they contributed small weekly amounts towards the purchase of these articles, and a further incentive was provided by the committee adding a bonus of threepence to each shilling which they paid in. In addition to thus providing food and clothing for its own pupils this first Ragged School did what it could to alleviate the hunger of all the poor in the neighbourhood by running soup kitchens and coal charities during the winter months. In 1860, three more such schools were opened, in Oyster Street, Oxford Street and St.-Mary-le-Bone Street.

A major problem which the Portsmouth schools had to face was absenteeism, often due to poverty since poor clothing and inadequate footwear kept children away from school in bad weather. Poverty also meant that children were often kept from school in order to supplement the family income by some kind of employment. But absenteeism also stemmed from other causes – the apathy of parents who cared nothing about their children's education and the natural desire of the children themselves to play truant, especially at the time of such local events as fairs. The increasingly disorderly and much-criticised Free Mart Fair had been abolished in 1846 after six centuries of existence, but Portsdown Fair continued annually to attract pleasure-seekers. At a quieter and more decorous level, tea-parties proved very popular with the girls of the Beneficial School, attendance at them apparently calling for a whole day's absence, to the annoyance of the mistress, who failed completely to stop a practice that had the parents' full connivance.

Another problem facing the schools in the middle of the nineteenth century (though absenteeism may have helped to ease it) was gross overcrowding. At a school in Upper Clarence Street there were 380 boys in a room measuring 50 feet by 36 feet and 140 girls in one 36 feet by 30 feet. At Bonfire Place the rooms were large and lofty and the desks were ample, but 250 boys in one room produced a deafening din, while at the Mary-le-Bone Street school between 80 and 100 boys and girls were packed into the ground floor of a private house, in a room measuring 40 feet by 14 and only 10 feet high. In the Sunday schools

[1] See above, p.9.

A Ragged School in action.

overcrowding was even worse, and in one case 180 boys and 200 girls received three and a half hours' teaching in a room 60 feet long, 25 feet wide and 16 feet high.

Besides being overcrowded schools were often ill-ventilated, with few windows and usually without playgrounds. It is hardly surprising that Dr. Henry Slight, one of Portsmouth's strongest advocates of sanitary reform, expressed grave concern at the health risk which most of the town's schools presented, aggravated by the inadequate water supply and drainage system. Some had no water-supply at all, while others received their water from wells so close to cesspools that they were likely to be polluted. At the Sunday school in Catherine Row the proximity of well and cesspool produced water so discoloured that Slight drily remarked that luckily the pump of the well was usually out of repair.

The situation of the schools often left much to be desired. At the Beneficial Society's school the girls had to suffer the nuisances caused by stables underneath the schoolroom, which meant not only the noise of horses and dogs and the bad language of the stable-lads but also the offensive smell from a dungheap. Moreover the unfortunate headmistress was obliged to wage a constant war against the dirt and depravity that existed in the area served by the school. Children were sent home if they arrived unwashed or with verminous heads or dirty pinafores. The district surrounding the school was rather notorious and the mistress had to endure interference from local low women, especially the keeper of a beerhouse who with her cronies frequently infested the steps of the school, using foul language, and even penetrated inside to hurl abuse at the girls who stayed after school to sweep the floors. Indeed such were the scenes outside the school with 'profligate women dancing to the music of a street organ' that the headmistress asked for blinds for the windows and frequently kept them down, though this darkened the schoolroom. The notoriety of the neighbourhood was such that the children had repeatedly to be warned against playing outside the school or loitering near it, and the doors had to be opened early in the morning with a teacher ready to take charge before the school day began.

With these many difficulties to contend with it is also hardly surprising that the education provided in most Portsmouth schools was very elementary. The Rev. W. H. Brookfield, who was for many years an inspector of the Portsmouth National Schools, considered a school to be fair when about a fifth of

its scholars could read a book such as *Robinson Crusoe* well enough for him to follow them without the book before him. He felt that the pupils should be able to work a plain sum in compound multiplication, write a few lines either from memory or from their own composition legibly and with fair spelling, and know a few simple facts of geography, mensuration and the topography of their own country. While he was prepared to accept scanty knowledge of history and grammar, he expected them to have a sound knowledge of the ten commandments and the life of Christ. Nevertheless some Portsmouth children fell short of even these low standards. In 1860 the headmaster of the Beneficial School stated that some girls received from other schools, of eleven and nine years of age, could not say their alphabet and in one case a girl of fourteen could neither read four-letter words nor add 2 and 2 together.

An evil which the children of the poor in Portsmouth were spared, however, was the large-scale exploitation of young workers that was found elsewhere, especially in the north of England, since apart from the dockyard (which will be considered later) there was really no large industry in the town. It is true that in such places as the candle-making factory, the dyeworks and the gas-manufacturing plant conditions seem to have varied little from the general national picture. This was certainly the case in the stay factories where girls were engaged in the production of corsets. Here twelve or thirteen hours a day were normally worked, and extended in the summer months to sixteen hours. These stay factories were considered by some to be places of temptation and vice, and as early as 1838 the excessive drinking in which young stay-workers indulged was commented upon in the *Hampshire Telegraph*. Cutting out the stiff and heavy lining made the children's fingers ache, and only one firm, Helby's in Portsea, provided stools for the girls to sit on. This firm employed fifty or sixty women and girls, although – as at other factories in the town – only a small proportion of them were under thirteen years of age. They did, however, employ 200 workers in their own homes and many of these were probably younger, as were the outworkers employed by shirt manufacturers. Twenty homeworkers in the pay of the shirt-making firm of Seagrove, which specialised in fitting out young cadets for the training ship *Illustrious*, were helped by their children of eight and nine years of age. Small children also aided their mothers employed by Joseph's of Portsea by threading needles or hemming. There were also apprentices to the homeworkers who for their first two months earned the munificent sum of sixpence a week, which could rise to six shillings by the time they were sixteen. Few homeworkers, however, took apprentices.

Dressmaking and millinery establishments in Portsmouth also put out work when they were busy, but usually the girls in these lived on the premises. Of the two, millinery was generally considered the less laborious and more attractive work, since long hours were unusual and not many girls under thirteen were employed. At Davis's establishment in Landport 24 workers were employed on the premises and 40 outworkers, milliners and mantlers, worked ten or ten-and-a-half hours a day and an hour longer during the summer months. Workers were allowed a half-holiday, to be taken on different days each week. At other mantle-makers', employing ten to sixteen hands, hours were usually ten a day, rising to twelve once a month. One reason for the shorter hours worked in this trade in Portsmouth as contrasted with London was the relatively early closing of drapers' shops at 8 p.m. instead of at eleven or midnight, which benefited not only the shop assistants somewhat but also others employed in the clothing industry in the town. Another factor was the absence of a fashionable 'season', so that it was rare for work to continue till ten or eleven at night unless a mourning order had to be executed, the completion of which often meant girls working all night to the detriment of their eyes. Young dressmakers employed by Turner's in Queen Street were more fortunate than most. Although they worked an eleven-hour day they were given an hour and a half out of this time for meals, and a dining-room was provided for those who brought food with them. Furthermore the treatment of the five workers who lived in the house was exceptionally good. They were allowed more freedom than was usual in such establishments and even given an occasional trip to the Isle of Wight.

But only a small number of girls in Portsmouth were employed in dressmaking or millinery establishments or stay factories. For the majority employment meant entering domestic service, which occupied the largest number of female workers in the country, including one in nine of all girls over the age of five. In Portsmouth the efforts of local elementary schools to prepare girls for this employment suggest that the majority entered it, especially as there was no alternative. It certainly seems to have been the only opening available for girls leaving the workhouse. Conditions for domestic servants naturally varied with the means and character of their employers. While some received decent treatment many suffered harshness which they

were compelled to endure because of the difficulty of finding other employment if they left without a reference. Moreover domestic service did at least mean a roof over their heads. When they were out of a place, especially if they were some distance from their parental home, they were forced to turn to lodging-houses for shelter and these often proved an introduction to vice and crime.

Most Portsmouth boys of the working class who attended schools either went to sea or found work in the dockyard when they left. The master of the Portsea workhouse reckoned that over a period of ten years 226 boys entered the Navy or the Army from the house, and eleven out of 33 boys apprenticed to trades left them later to go to sea. For some of these boys this might take them no further away than the Gosport ferry, while others in the merchant service travelled much further afield. Some of those who served in merchantmen joined the Navy later. Every merchant vessel had its Queen's Boy, under fifteen years of age, who received half-a-crown a week till he was twenty under a scheme to establish a nursery of seamen for the Navy. In addition boys who had served two years at sea, either in the Navy or the merchant service, could enrol for a naval apprenticeship scheme at fourteen years of age and serve a five-year apprenticeship instead of the usual seven. Conditions in the merchant service, however, were not conducive to health or safety until Samuel Plimsoll conducted his campaign between 1868 and 1876 to improve them. For naval apprentices, on the other hand, they had become a good deal better during the early years of the century. Pay was in line with that of merchant seamen and there were three regular meals a day which contrasted favourably with the fare that would probably have fallen to their lot in civilian life. Grog, however, which was one of the Navy's major attractions for adults, was no longer issued to lads under eighteen after 1850, but instead they received a sum of money which was paid to the Master-at-Arms and spent on clothing.

Young boys who joined the naval apprenticeship scheme had to undertake to remain in the Service until they were twenty-eight, though the certainty of such continuous employment must have been an inducement to many to enrol. Boys were preferred who could read and write and were the sons of sailors or soldiers. Their first year was spent partly in learning a useful trade, with strict attention to religious duties and the 'Three Rs', together with geography. Habits of cleanliness, order and regularity were instilled, and 'emulation, cheerfulness and alacrity' were encouraged. They were instructed in the necessary seamen's skills and taught to swim, a vital accomplishment at a time when large numbers of seamen lost their lives through being washed overboard. The life of a sailor, indeed, was hazardous even in peace-time, since in addition to this risk young seamen were in some danger of being killed by falling from the masts or rigging.

Many other Portsmouth boys who chose not to go to sea turned to the dockyard for employment. The yard was a major industrial unit embracing a variety of occupations, all labelled and classified, organised on traditional industrial lines and principally dominated by skilled craftsmen. It was therefore an advantage for a boy to gain an apprenticeship here. The apprentices attended the dockyard school for one or two afternoons and three evenings a week in the winter months to study reading, writing and the four basic rules of arithmetic. After four years the eight most promising boys were chosen annually to attend the mathematical school. The rest of the time was spent in learning their trade.

The yard did not lavish as much care on all the boys in its employ. Until the Factory Extension Act of 1867 there was no restriction on the hours for which they were employed. Boys of nine or ten and upwards worked in the rope department and on bilgework from six in the morning till six at night in summer and five-thirty at night in winter. This was the lot of the lowest grade of 'arabs', employed to scuffle out boilers by scraping out the salt that had accumulated inside them after each voyage and bilging out the mud, water and obnoxious accumulations that had collected in the bottom of the vessel. Their lot therefore contrasted most unfavourably with that of the apprentices.

There were also a variety of unskilled occupations available for Portsmouth youths, including employment as errand boys, drivers of carts, domestic servants and shop-hands.

For children in employment, working on an average at least ten or twelve hours a day, leisure time was naturally limited. For working-class children who were neither employed nor attending school, on the other hand, leisure hours were many and were spent in roaming the streets and often (as already shown) in lawlessness. Even children's games that did not directly involve vandalism or crime were often a nuisance to adults and the Vagrancy Act was sometimes invoke against them. Hopscotch, playing with peashooters or slings and a game called for some reason 'gingerbread' which consisted of knocking at respectable residents' doors and then running away frequently resulted in appearances in court. Gambling

in the shape of pitch and toss in secluded spots such as Southsea Common or the corners of various squares was a favourite pastime of Portsmouth boys despite the risk of imprisonment if they were caught in the act. It was chiefly engaged in on Sundays and in many cases the boys involved were under the age of fourteen.

Many adults did their best to encourage children to read by organising libraries, like that of the Unitarian Sunday school in the High Street, and there were a number of earnest young workers who spent their leisure evenings trying to improve their education by attending evening schools. Other entertainments for working-class children in the middle years of the nineteenth century included the functions organised by the local schools or Sunday schools, such as visits to fêtes, the Fair or the theatre. When very young children were taken to the performances at the 'Royal', however, the noise they made became such a nuisance and interrupted the programme so much that the proprietor was driven to charge double for those under five, while admitting those between five and twelve for half-price, and treating the workhouse children to a free show at pantomime time. Other spectacles to which the latter and the children of the orphan and ragged schools were given free entry were dioramas of such exciting events as the search in the Arctic for the lost Sir John Franklin and his men or the Indian Mutiny. Then there were Sunday school parties at which, after being regaled with plum cake and tea, the children would settle down to watch a magic lantern show or listen to a visiting missionary speaker, while schools like the National ones at Bonfire Corner and the Portsea Ragged School also organised annual outings at which they played open-air games on Portsdown Hill or Thomas Owen's[1] fields at Southsea. It seems, therefore, that though life was hard and long hours were worked by those in employment a considerable number of poor children in mid-nineteenth-century Portsmouth did have some limited opportunities for play and pleasure.

The pauper children confined in the workhouse, though their welfare was attended to more than readers of Charles Dickens might suppose, had of course less freedom than the hordes of poor children who – for good or ill – were free to roam the streets. In 1852 they were allowed leave from the workhouse once in three months (once a month after 1867, or more often at the Governor's discretion), but they had to submit to being searched each time they left. However despite this restriction on their freedom of movement they were more fortunate in many ways than poor children living outside the workhouse walls. The guardians took great care to protect those who left to become domestic servants or serve apprenticeships. To ensure that apprentices were well treated they made periodical investigations and when cases of maltreatment were discovered they promptly took the apprentice back into the workhouse, secured the cancellation of his indentures and prosecuted the offending master.

But though every effort was made to settle pauper children happily in their work after they left the workhouse, the guardians made little attempt to prepare them for this future work. An effort to remedy this as far as the girls were concerned was made in 1855 when it was realised that an increasing number of them remained in domestic service only for a short time after leaving the house. It was considered that a probable reason was that although they had been given a moral and religious education they had had no specific training for their future calling. An assistant teacher was therefore engaged to conduct an industrial branch of the workhouse school, which proved very satisfactory and provided training for twenty girls at a time. Until 1845 the school had been rather inefficient, but after that it improved greatly and inspectors were much impressed by the standard it had reached. In their reports they made special mention of the quality of the music teaching, and indeed the children's singing won the approbation of all who heard it. One enthusiastic hearer asserted that the choirboys of St. Thomas's Church, who were second only to those of Winchester Cathedral in musical reputation, could well take a lesson from the the children of the house. Even before the appointment of a military music instructor in 1865 many boys left to join military or naval bands, and in 1859 forty were reported to be serving as bandsmen in India. An army sergeant also drilled the boys, with results which again received the inspectors' commendation.

There was, however, one fly in the ointment in the later 'fifties – overcrowding resulting from increases in the number of children admitted. The Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny which followed it within less than a year left numerous Service families in the town destitute when their men went overseas, and by 1859 the number of children in the house had risen so greatly that the Governor claimed that there were

[1] See Dr. R. C. Riley's paper (Portsmouth Paper No. 16) on 'The Growth of Southsea . . .', pp. 10–11.

cases where five or six children were having to sleep in one bed. As a temporary means of reducing this overcrowding recourse was had to providing outrelief (contrary to general policy) instead of relief within the house. In the late 'sixties assisted emigration to Australia was tried as another solution, but only four girls applied to the Portsmouth guardians for help in emigrating thither. Pauper emigration to the southern continent, in fact, had fallen into disfavour, partly because of the attitude of the Australians, who had become increasingly reluctant to accept pauper immigrants, and partly because after the gold rush in Australia many at home felt that it was not a suitable place to which to send young people. It was only earlier, in 1851, that girls in the Portsmouth workhouse had shown any keen desire to emigrate. Thirty aged between fifteen and nineteen had applied to go to Australia in that year. The safe arrival of the first thirteen and their success in finding employment had encouraged others to follow suit. One young emigrant when writing home reported that she had obtained a post as a nursemaid almost as soon as she arrived, adding (no doubt proudly) that she had received three proposals of marriage within four months. Another wrote after eighteen months in her new country to express her satisfaction with her life there and urge her friends to follow her example, ending her letter with her best respects to the officers of the workhouse, of whom it is clear that she thought with affection. Her letter confirms the general impression gained from the guardians' minutes that the children had a warm affection for the staff of the house, regarded it as their home and were happy there. Indeed, they were often reluctant to leave. Unlike many other poor children living outside they were well fed and clothed, eating meat regularly, for instance, as few of these others could; though as we have seen overcrowding became as acute as in the homes of the latter. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that they were ever subjected to cruel treatment, and only in one case in fifteen years is there evidence of neglect, when a ten-year-old boy ran away. Each year the children were taken in waggonettes to Portsdown Hill or Portchester, where they played cricket and other 'rustic games' and gorged themselves on the tea and plum cake provided by the guardians and their ladies.

The state, however, did not extend its responsibility for children living in workhouses to the large number on outrelief. In Portsmouth children were the largest class receiving this. In one fortnight in 1859, 224 children applied for it, as against 41 men and 106 women. Only rarely did the guardians show concern for the welfare of these children, and there is no indication that they made any attempt to provide for their education although an act of 1855 had empowered them to do so.

The childhood of the working classes was brief in mid-Victorian Portsmouth, as it was elsewhere in the country. If disease and poor living conditions did not shorten its span, then the demands of society did. Children worked from an early age, and from an early age suffered the same rigorous penalties for their misdemeanours as adults did. True, there were no such grim factory conditions here as those which in the north of England augmented the high child mortality. But housing, sanitation, food and medical care were as inadequate for the children of Portsmouth as for those elsewhere, with the same deleterious effects on health and well-being.

Only the pauper child received official protection from neglect and cruelty in mid-nineteenth-century Portsmouth. Other unfortunate children had to rely chiefly on voluntary effort to remedy neglect of education, clothing and food, and voluntary effort was not enough to meet the needs of all of them. In providing education it was hampered by lack of funds and equipment, but it did enable a growing number to receive rudimentary schooling until the coming of the Education Act of 1870. In the same way, though again insufficient to meet the needs of all, charitable efforts did succeed in feeding and clothing some of Portsmouth's needy children, especially in the winter months. In the absence of state provision the middle-class philanthropists of the town did a great deal to alleviate the suffering that abounded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their grateful thanks for help in obtaining illustrations, to Mrs. Guy of the City Reference Library, Mr. A. Corney of the City Museum, Mr. John Webb of the Portsmouth College of Education, Mr. A. R. Higgott the Schools Service Officer, the City Engineer's Photographic Department and Messrs. B. T. Batsford Limited.

Professor Patterson also wishes to emphasise that the research on which a great part of this Paper is based was carried out by Mrs. Stanford.

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